



NEWS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

April 29, 1998

Hugh Vickery 202-208-5634

HUNTERS REPORT MIXED SUCCESS DURING 1997-98 WATERFOWL SEASON

Despite projections for record numbers of ducks flying south last fall, waterfowl hunters across the country reported only mixed success during the 1997-1998 season, according to an informal survey by state and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists.

In many states, hunters said they did well early in the season, but mild weather, possibly linked to El Nino, dispersed the birds and made hunting more difficult as the season progressed. Migrating birds might have stopped short of some southern states, where many hunters reported a poor season.

"We had widely varying reports of hunting success," said Paul Schmidt, chief of the Service's Migratory Bird Management Office. "Even within individual states, some hunters reported banner years while others said they saw very few ducks.

"Obviously, this underscores the point that just having a lot of ducks migrating south doesn't mean everyone is going to have good hunting success. Local weather and habitat conditions often have more to do with hunting success than anything else. This year, we had the additional influence of El Nino, which may have had a major impact on when and where birds migrated."

The Service gathers harvest data from each state, but that information will not be available until this summer. In the meantime, here is a summary of the anecdotal evidence biologists gathered in each of the four flyways:

- o Atlantic Flyway — Generally, most states reported fair to good hunting success during their early duck seasons but later hunting success was poor. Some states indicated that hunter success and satisfaction were highly variable, average in some places but poor in others. Coastal hunting was poor in most areas of New England with low numbers of black ducks, scaup, and a paucity of sea ducks. Many hunters in Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina expressed frustration with hunting conditions, blaming the lack of success on mild weather and well-dispersed duck populations.
- o Mississippi Flyway — Hunting success varied greatly, with some hunters reporting excellent seasons while others reported very poor seasons. The general pattern in many areas seemed to reflect good success early in the season and declining success thereafter. Notable exceptions were Catahoula Lake in Louisiana, where hunting success was the

best in many years, and Missouri, where the duck harvest could be the highest since 1975. Hunters in Mississippi, Alabama, eastern Tennessee, southern Ohio, and parts of Louisiana and Kentucky reported poor hunting throughout the season.

- o Central Flyway — Generally, hunters reported better success early in the season with declining success later as birds dispersed widely across available habitat. Duck hunting was reported good to excellent in portions of Nebraska and the High Plains and the Central and Lower Gulf Coast regions of Texas. It was considered generally good in Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, Montana, New Mexico, and Oklahoma; however many hunters said they were disappointed at seeing fewer mallards. The migration was one to two weeks later than normal in most areas.
- o Pacific Flyway — Hunters reported a fairly good season overall. Ducks were plentiful throughout most of the flyway, but hunters said that mild weather reduced their success. Hunters in Nevada reported an excellent season, while in other states success was varied because of weather conditions.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service's 94 million acres include 512 national wildlife refuges, 78 ecological services field stations, 65 national fish hatcheries, 50 wildlife coordination areas, and 38 wetland management districts with waterfowl production areas.

The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes Federal excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies. This program is a cornerstone of the Nation's wildlife management efforts, funding fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, shooting ranges, and related projects across America.